



<https://www.washingtonpost.com/photography/2022/04/18/this-book-is-meditation-not-only-photography-life/>

# A photographer meditates on his craft — and what shapes it

By Kenneth Dickerman

Photo editor

Monday April 18<sup>th</sup>



Broad Street, Regina, Saskatchewan, Aug. 17, 1974. From "Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography." (Stephen Shore)

Stephen Shore's photography has always been known for its ability to tease out the remarkable from the banal. His new book is no different. In "[Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography](#)" (Mack, 2022), he shares his thoughts and experiences on his photographic practice or, more precisely, the things that have shaped that practice throughout more than four decades.

It would be easy to diminish the book through distillation. Instead, I'll share some of the thoughts that surfaced while reading.

Shore, one of the most well known, heavily exhibited and lauded photographers alive, has produced some of the medium's most influential bodies of work, including "[Uncommon Places](#)" and "[American Surfaces](#)."



Kingman, Ariz., July 2, 1975. From "Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography." (Stephen Shore)

So it is a real treat to read about the things that have informed his journey as a photographer — the things he has learned and internalized. It seems reductive, and maybe a bit obvious, to say we are the accumulation of our experiences. But it's true: The way we interact with the world, our families, our co-workers and our pastimes — these guide everything we do.

Reading "Modern Instances" is like having a conversation with Shore that meanders gloriously through his creative life. The book touches on so many interesting subjects: architecture, sculpture, painting, even LSD



Self-portrait, New York, 1957. From  
“Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography.” (Stephen Shore)

Throughout the book, we’re reminded that everything we experience nourishes what we produce. We find out, for example, that Shore likes to fly-fish. And in one section of the book, he talks about Norman Maclean’s book [“A River Runs Through It,”](#) plucking this line from its pages: “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.”

For me, reading “Modern Instances” mirrors that line. In the myriad details — thoughts about, say, Walker Evans, Eugène Atget, Robert Frank — you see how they all shaped Shore’s photos.

There’s way too much in the book to try to describe here. But here’s a good example of what you’re in for:

“By 1972, my interest shifted to making pictures that looked like the experience of seeing. As an exercise, to practice this, I’d pay close attention to what seeing actually looked like. I’d pause and observe my field of vision at random moments. I would, at random moments, take ‘screenshots’ of my field of vision. “The following year I began using a view camera, first a 4x5, then an 8x10. Due to the deliberateness of using a view camera on a tripod, where every single decision is so starkly etched, a new process began.”

This passage illuminates a philosophical contrast between the work found in “American Surfaces” and “Uncommon Places.” The photographs in the former are looser, seemingly on the fly, while the latter’s images are more deliberate and formal.



Granite, Okla., July, 1972. From “Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography.” (Stephen Shore)



Presidio, Tex., Feb. 21, 1975. From “Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography.” (Stephen Shore)

The photographs here of a phone booth and a dusty Texas street scene help illustrate the difference between these two styles. The phone booth photo, like the photos you see in “American Surfaces,” is less formal than the Texas street scene, which feels more deliberate and studied. Yet both are meditations on the extraordinary revealed in the ordinary.

And these meditations don’t exist in a vacuum. It’s a kind of chorus throughout “Modern Instances”: We are the totality of all the little bits we sponge up as we experience life.

“Modern Instances” is more than just a collection of musings about a life lived in the arts. The book itself is an artwork.

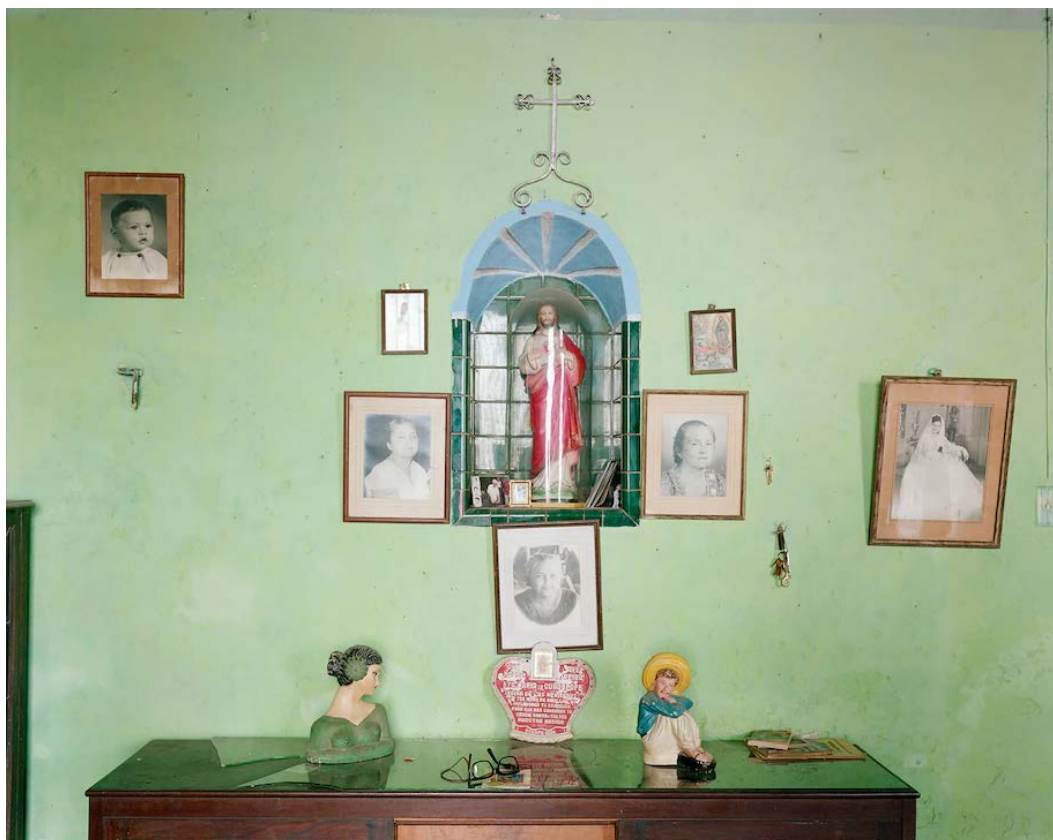


Burbank, Calif., Aug. 11, 1981. From “Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography.” (Stephen Shore)

And just like that line from Maclean, we see how all the experiences that flow around us as life plods on eventually merge. Sometimes images appear throughout the book without explicit reasons for being there. But they all have their place in this body of work.



U.S. 27, Moore Haven, Fla., Nov. 15, 1977. From "Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography." (Stephen Shore)



Yucatán, Mexico, Jan. 4, 1990. From "Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography." (Stephen Shore)

In Sight is The Washington Post's photography blog for visual narrative. This platform showcases compelling and diverse imagery from staff members and freelance photographers, news agencies and archives. If you are interested in submitting a story to In Sight, please complete [this form](#).

-----

By Kenneth Dickerman

Kenneth Dickerman is a photo editor. He previously worked as a photo editor at MSN in Seattle and TIME in New York City. Before that, he worked as a freelance photographer specializing in politics and conflict and his work appeared in The New York Times, TIME and US News & World Report among other publications.